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SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE 3/30/07: VP SELECTION; QARASE TRAVEL;
CORRUPTION COMMISSION; RFMF TRANSITIONS

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Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) is to consider President Iloilo's choice for Vice President on April 11-12. Rumored candidates include a woman and an ethnic-Indian, but the favorite remains interim Foreign Minister Nailatikau. The Acting Chief Justice is considering whether PM Qarase has the right to attend court sessions in Suva. The interim Cabinet has approved an Independent Commission against Corruption with sweeping powers. Commodore Bainimarama's brother-in-law, Fiji's Navy Commander, has pleaded "not guilty" to a New Year's Eve murder. The Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) has promoted four majors and has acknowledged that ten officers, including four lawyers, have left the military since the coup. End summary.

Fiji Vice Presidential sweepstakes

¶2. (C) President Iloilo (read Commodore Bainimarama) has reportedly made his choice for the replacement of Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi as Vice President and has placed the name into a sealed envelope, awaiting a meeting of the GCC on April 11-12. Under the Fiji Constitution, the GCC has approval rights over the President's selection. Interim Foreign Minister Ratu Epeli Nailatikau is still the presumed favorite. His brother Ratu Tuakitau "Tuki" Cokanauto has also been mentioned. Both come from Bau, the chiefly island, as does Madraiwiwi. The RFMF spokesman says LtCol. Tevita Mara, the late President Mara's son, is not in the running. Interestingly, in recent days two other names have entered the rumor mill. Both would be firsts. Adi Koila Mara, wife of Nailatikau and sister of Tevita Mara, would be Fiji's first woman VP. Sir Moci Tikaram, retired Chief Justice of the Fiji Court of Appeals, would be the first ethnic-Indian VP. Proposing an ethnic-Indian, in particular, would really shock the ethnic-Fijian community and would test the mettle of the GCC.

The travel ban on Qarase v. the courts

¶3. (U) Acting Chief Justice Anthony Gates on March 30 heard arguments from PM Qarase's lawyer about the need for Qarase to be present in court in Suva for the hearing of his case against the coup perpetrators. Gates reserved judgment, sought additional affidavits, and scheduled the next hearing for April 11.

Independent Corruption Commission decree

¶4. (C) The Fiji interim cabinet has approved creation of an Independent Commission against Corruption that is to report directly to the President. The Commission is charged to receive, investigate, and prosecute complaints in its own capacity, independent of the Director of Public Prosecution and the Fiji Police Force. The Commission will have powers of search, seizure, and arrest, and the mandate will include investigation of election irregularities. Since the coup, an "anti-corruption unit" under oversight of Deputy RFMF Commander Teleni and headed by Nasir Ali has been undertaking raids against businesses and government ministries on the basis of rumor and with no noticeable rule-of-law restraints.

Presumably that unit will be subsumed within the new Commission. Interestingly, the anti-corruption unit and the Fiji Police competed this week to investigate the Ministry of Public Works. Police have had an investigation under way (slowly) since 2003. On March 28, they entered and seized documents only hours before anti-corruption unit officials arrived to do the same. Reportedly, the anti-corruption unit put its foot down and Police investigators are backing off.

Navy Commander pleads "not guilty" re murder

¶5. (U) Francis Kean, Commander of the Fiji Navy and brother-in-law of Commodore Bainimarama, pleaded "not guilty" in criminal court on March 30 to charges he beat a man to death New Year's Eve during a wedding reception for Bainimarama's daughter. Trial is to begin Oct. 29. In the meantime, Kean, who is on paid leave from the RFMF, remains free on bail. His lawyer is seeking an easing of bail restrictions.

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Military promotions

¶6. (C) The RFMF announced on March 28 the promotion of four officers from major to lieutenant colonel: Jone Kalouniwai, Sitiveni Qilio (Qiliho), Inia Seruivatu, and Ifereimi Vasu. Land Forces Commander Col. Driti said all four had worked hard and had been majors for a long time. Kalouniwai and Qilio are on the U.S. visa-sanction list. Vasu reportedly just completed studies at Malaysia's Military Staff Academy.

Military departures

¶7. (C) The RFMF has acknowledged that ten officers have left the service since the coup. Some reportedly are lawyers, including Major Amani Bale, Major Davina Chan-Ligaiula, and Major Ana Rokomokoti, all of whom are on the U.S. visa-sanction list. Other departures include Navy Commander Bradley Bower, Lt. John Fong, Captain Joeli Pickering, Captain Solomone Raravula, and Captain Bernie Ramafono. We know Bower resigned in protest of the coup, though at the time the RFMF spokesman claimed there was no connection. Presumably some or all of the others were similarly motivated.

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